

# Caesar, Alexander, and Pompey: the making of a dictator

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In Republican Rome, a politician had to make a name for himself. Julius Caesar's problem was that he was operating in a crowded market. Comparisons with Alexander the Great and his great rival Pompey were particularly troubling.

When Julius Caesar was serving as a provincial administrator in Further Spain, he visited Cadiz. There, he saw a statue of Alexander the Great and wept. His companions asked him why and he replied that it was because he had done nothing memorable at the age at which Alexander had already conquered the world.

This story occurs frequently in the ancient biographies of Caesar. It aligns him with Alexander, whose extraordinary military achievements almost three centuries earlier made him the most obvious counterpart to Caesar in the Greek world. And it gives us, as readers, a glimpse of Caesar in an apparent moment of weakness, doubting his abilities just before he proceeds to prove himself wrong with achievements which match, if not transcend, those of Alexander. Its very attractiveness as a story might suggest to us that it may never actually have happened. But true or not, it does indicate the competitive nature of Roman politics in the late Republic. If Caesar really was comparing himself with Alexander and finding himself wanting, the reasons for his anxiety may have lain closer to home.

## Young guns go for it

Why might Caesar have been concerned about achieving success at a young age? Political careers in the late Republic were, in theory, governed by strict rules about the order in which offices could be held and the age which candidates needed to have reached before they could hold them. The minimum age for entry in the Senate was thirty, with the holding of the quaestorship; and the consulship, the highest office among the regular annual magistracies, could not be held before the age of forty-two. This framework seems to have been in place in some form for

many years, and had recently been reaffirmed by Sulla in 81 B.C. as part of his attempt to re-establish firm senatorial government and stop individuals from gaining excessive power by holding offices consecutively. The problem was that, in a fiercely competitive and individualistic political arena, such a framework became itself a target against which individuals could measure their own success against that of their rivals. Cicero, for example, placed great emphasis on the fact that he had reached the offices he held *suo anno*, 'in his own year'; that is, at the earliest possible time allowed by the laws on office-holding. Still more exciting was the prospect of demonstrating one's outstanding qualities by ignoring the prescribed ages altogether.

Some of the most glamorous figures in the history of the Republic had done precisely that, such as the elder Scipio, granted a consul's command in Spain in 210 B.C. at the age of 26, without having held the consulship; and his adoptive grandson Scipio Aemilianus, elected to the consulship in 147 B.C. by popular demand, ahead of his permitted time, to take charge of the war against Carthage. And of most immediate relevance to Caesar's tears in Spain was Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, 'the Great' – better known today as Pompey – whose meteoric career had, ironically, been initiated by Sulla, who confirmed him in official command when Pompey was only twenty-three. Pompey had gone on to campaign in Spain in the 70s B.C., before returning to Italy to mop up the end of the Spartacus revolt before entering the Senate, for the first time, as consul in 70 B.C. After his consulship he had again eschewed the normal path through public life, by refusing to go out to a provincial command. Instead, he had enjoyed a brief period of

private life before being entrusted by the people with a special command against the pirates and then against Mithridates, king of Pontus, a long-standing enemy of Rome in Asia Minor and the Black Sea area. Pompey brought the Mithridates campaign to a triumphant conclusion before returning to Rome to celebrate a triumph of unparalleled splendour and lavishness. It was a career that had, at every stage, defied conventional expectations. And if you had asked a Roman at the end of the sixties who the Roman Alexander was, the answer would have been unhesitating: Pompey.

Caesar, by contrast, had pursued a more-or-less standard career path, gaining experience as part of the entourage of provincial governors before himself holding public offices in the normal order. The only really exceptional feature in his career before he campaigned for the consulship was that he had been elected to the office of Chief Priest in 63 B.C. defeating a much older and more experienced rival for the position. This position did not confer on its holder any direct political power; but the priestly colleges were both prestigious and influential, and as the head of public religion Caesar now had a life-long role within the state, even when he was not holding public office.

## Making a name for oneself

Caesar was therefore, by 60 B.C., pursuing a conventional public career with notable success. But it was utterly unremarkable in contrast with that of Pompey, who had so completely transcended the achievements of his contemporaries. However, over the next decade Caesar would exploit the opportunities which his conventional public career made available to him so that, by 50 B.C., he had made for himself a position from which he could challenge the entire state.

How did he do this? Hints of what was to come can be seen in the manner in which he secured election to the consulship; he made a deal with Pompey so that,

in return for Pompey's support in the elections, he would ensure that proper provision was made for Pompey's veterans. Another politician, Crassus, also joined this compact; and whilst political alliances were nothing new in Roman politics, this one – the so-called 'first triumvirate' – struck contemporaries as dangerously novel. 'Why do you need details about the republic? It is entirely destroyed,' wrote Cicero to his friend Atticus in July 59 B.C.

The second stage was to secure a provincial command which would give Caesar opportunity for spectacular military action. Foreign policy was normally the preserve of the Senate, and Caesar's enemies there tried to stymie him by decreeing that the consuls of 59 B.C. should have as their province 'the woods and paths of Italy'. Banditry was certainly a problem at this time, but to put consuls in charge of the state's response was a calculated insult: Caesar's response was to bypass the Senate and go straight to the people, just as Pompey had acquired his commands against the pirates and against Mithridates from the people. They passed a law granting him a command in Cisalpine Gaul and Illyria: and the term was set at five years, a further advantage over a senatorial command with its annual cycle and possibility, not guarantee, of extension.

The Senate subsequently added the province of Transalpine Gaul to Caesar's allocation, and his attention turned decisively north. Caesar's own *Commentaries* on the Gallic War were probably published in instalments every year, each book providing the next stage in what was to be an inexorable advance of Roman power into new areas, and there would certainly have been reports to the Senate of his activities. We can trace the excitement that the campaigns generated in Cicero's letters, as he considers, only half in jest, the prospect of gold being discovered, and in Catullus' poetry. Following Caesar's brief invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 B.C. the island became briefly fashionable, acting as a short-hand for geographical remoteness (Catullus 11), political ambition (Catullus 45), or the possibilities of provincial corruption (Catullus 29). By adroit manipulation of the opinions of those in Rome, Caesar was able to establish a narrative of overwhelming success against Gallic barbarians to rival Pompey's story of himself as the conqueror of the East.

### **Caesar and Pompey: rivalry and jealousy**

Caesar becomes the Caesar of subsequent historical record only with his victory over Pompey in the civil war and then his dictatorship. Had he failed in his invasion of Italy in 49 B.C., he would probably have taken his place alongside other failed aspi-

nants to power such as Catiline or Sertorius. The events of the fifties B.C. do not, therefore, explain Caesar's success. But they do show how he got into a position where he could offer his challenge in 49 B.C.; and they also demonstrate the point at which Caesar's ambitions became manifest, as he pushed at the boundaries of what could be accepted in order to set himself up as a genuine rival to Pompey.

It is curious that in the encounter between Caesar and Pompey it was Pompey, the man who set up the late Republican model of the mould-breaking warlord, who ultimately wanted to preserve government by the Senate and to find a way to incorporate his own desire for pre-eminence within the traditional Roman framework of rule by the elite. Caesar, although he imitated others in his methods of acquiring power, had no interest, once he had this power, in maintaining the Republic. The Emperor Augustus understood this, and took Pompey's public administration as his model in establishing the principate much more than that of Caesar. The poet Lucan, writing an epic in the later part of the first century A.D. about the civil war summed up the contrast between the two men in a memorable phrase: 'Caesar cannot bear a superior, Pompey, an equal.'

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